

Developing Research Excellence in Transnational Research Collaborations

A Reflection Paper for the IDRC / COADY 2013 Canadian Learning Forum

by John Gaventa and Bettina von Lieres

Name(s) of Researchers	Dr. Bettina von Lieres, Centre for Critical Development Studies, University of Toronto Scarborough, bvonlieres@utsc.utoronto.ca Dr. John Gaventa, Coady International Institute, St. Francis Xavier University jgaventa@stfx.ca
Research Project Title	“Development Research Excellence in Transnational Research Collaborations on Citizenship and Democracy”
Location of research	Case studies in Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa
Dates research conducted	2000 – 2011
Partner(s)	Researchers and practitioners from the following institutions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accao Para O Desenvolvimento Rural E Ambiental (ADRA – Angola) • BRAC Development Institute, Bangladesh • Centre for Policy Studies, India • Institute of Development Studies, UK • Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA – India) Theatre for Development centre of Ahmadu Bello University (TFDC – Nigeria) • The Brazilian Centre for Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP), Brazil • The University of the Western Cape, South Africa • The University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa • The University of Stellenbosch, South Africa • The Centre for Critical Development Studies, University of Toronto, Canada
Funder(s)	DFID, IDRC (Canadian Partnerships Program and Think Tank Initiative)
Research methods used	Multiple methods including action research, ethnography, participant observation, interviews and quantitative surveys, leading to 150 case studies in 120 countries
E-Links	http://www.drc-citizenship.org / http://www.cordnetwork.org
Did or will your research project lead to a second phase?	Yes, the DRC network was followed by a new global collaborative research network on democracy – the Collaboration for Research on Democracy (CORD). The CORD network recently completed a first round research activities and will initiate a new set of research projects at a workshop in India in February 2014.

Introduction

While in the past, development research might have focused on particular projects or institutions, increasingly we see it involving larger research and knowledge networks -- often with multiple partners, spanning countries, disciplines, policy and practice, and north and south. An important assumption of this strategy is that complex global problems require complex global networks, which can produce knowledge for development that go beyond the insights of any particular perspective or actor.

The potential of such knowledge networks is great. However, little is known about what policies best enhance the effectiveness and excellence of development research in general, and even less is known about how to build and sustain complex research networks or their particular contributions to change.

One example of such a network is called *Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability* (Citizenship-DRC). Funded by United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) from 2000 – 2011, the Citizenship DRC involved over 60 researchers in 20 countries, with seven core institutional partners based Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Mexico, Nigeria and South Africa. It was coordinated by a small secretariat based at the Institute of Development Studies. (For further background, please see <http://www.drc-citizenship.org>.)

This short reflection paper summarises lessons learnt about research excellence from the CDRC network and the emerging CORD network. Each of the authors has been involved in both networks. Both examples show how global research networks in development can challenge older, received models of North-South research partnerships which often tended to be centralised and hierarchical, focused narrowly on technical assistance and capacity-building, and on the deficits and not the assets of Southern research partners. Today more and more transnational knowledge networks focus on building multiple forms of knowledge (an 'ecology of knowledges'), mutual learning and innovation, and collaborative and participatory research and learning processes.

An outgrowth of the Citizenship DRC was a new research network which was launched in May 2012, *the Collaboration for Research on Democracy or CORD* (<http://www.cordnetwork.org>). CORD is made up of 30 researchers and practitioners from Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, India, South Africa, the UK and Canada. Nine institutions are affiliated with CORD:

- BRAC Development Institute,
- BRAC University, Bangladesh;
- CEBRAP- Brazil;
- the Institute of Development Studies,
- Sussex University;
- the Centre for Policy Studies, Delhi, India;
- the Universities of the Western Cape and Stellenbosch in South Africa;
- the COADY International Institute at St. Francis Xavier University and
- the Centre for Critical Development Studies, University of Toronto Scarborough.

The wider CORD research network catalyzes the generation of smaller, multi-country, comparative South-South research projects on democracy and development under the heading "*Creating Citizenship: the everyday struggles for access and quality*". CORD's research projects are developed and designed collaboratively at larger, face-to-face CORD network meetings, two of which were held at the University of Toronto Scarborough in May 2012 and in Delhi, India in December 2012.

CORD's wider aims include:

- generating new knowledges about complex development issues across multiple contexts;
- disseminating these new knowledges widely to decision-makers and practitioners;
- fostering dynamic engagement between researchers, practitioners and policy-makers; and
- understanding and developing strategies for long-term sustainable local funding mechanisms.

CORD's research groups collaborate using new tools for virtual collaboration (including a new virtual collaboration platform), face-to face research workshops, and online, electronic research.

“Research Excellence” in the Networks

Given the considerable diversity of disciplinary and methodological backgrounds of the researchers participating in our networks, research excellence has always been understood as being **multi-dimensional**. High quality research in transnational research collaborations with a focus on multi-contextual research requires bridging disciplinary, geographic and theory/practice divides. Both examples show that working collaboratively in multi-stakeholder and transnational partnerships, across contextual boundaries and in teams that bridge countries, disciplines and sectors, can bring important new insights into complex social, political and economic processesⁱ

In order to achieve this, our research programs started with research questions developed in local realities, instead of starting with pre-selected universal questions and rigid overarching project designs. While initial research questions were generated from each context, working groups were then formed to pursue critical themes across our research. Each of these groups moved from research question to broader concepts and back again. In the Citizenship DRC, over 150 locally-grounded cases were produced and were synthesised in six volumes on cross cutting themes (See *Claiming Citizenship series*, Zed Books). Following this work, the CORD research network has used a similar process to produce a new book of cases on mediation between states and citizens (Macmillan Palgrave, forthcoming).

Each group used a common process involving:

- *Generating questions* through a participatory process;
- *Sharpening the questions and the frame* using a variety of collaborative approaches;
- *Choosing cases to work with*: In many instances, the cases for study were chosen because the researchers had other ongoing links to them, and they were seen as places for action and change, not just places for study;
- *Sharing, critiquing and re-framing*: Most groups had mid-point workshops in which researchers shared early drafts of their material;
- *Re-writing case studies; deepening analysis*: Following the global workshops, researchers often went to the cases, with new questions and with deeper probing, based in part on the need to be able to compare this case with other trends that were emerging; .
- *Synthesising findings*: in most cases, each of the working groups worked together to generate synthesis across the findings in a participatory way. Again, this process differs a great deal from one in which researchers from different countries feed their findings into a central hub for synthesis in which they have no role;
- *Final writing and publishing*: moving to the final published product often was a challenge for editors and contributors alike. The goal was to include as many of the products emerging from the local research as possible;

-
- *Generating new questions:* Over the life of the networks, the work of one working group often contributed both to the questions and ways of working of subsequent working groups. In this sense knowledge was both generative and accumulative;
 - *Sharing 'downwards' as well as 'upwards':* For most of the researchers, generating research for an international audience was only one purpose. Equally, if not more important, was the way that the knowledge was used by and with those whose lives were being researched.

In many settings, research and knowledge production are highly hierarchical affairs, full of unequal power relationships as well as conflicts and fractiousness. There are often senior more powerful researchers who frame the questions, analyse the results, and receive the credit; and junior researchers who play data gathering and more service-oriented roles. The power relationships are embedded in the research process and may translate into highly hierarchical research institutes that reflect rather than challenge the dominant power relationships in the broader society.

Both research networks have emphasized a different approach to collaboration that involved multiple stakeholders – researchers, partner organizations, policy makers, citizens – from the very beginning in developing the research program. Researchers were encouraged to engage with local practitioners throughout the research process to orient the research program in contextual issues and problems. The research programs also involved participatory workshops that focused on the multiple and complex roles of the researcher in engaging with multiple stakeholders.

Rather than creating a competitive environment in which one approach or researcher produced the 'best' knowledge on behalf of others, we sought to co-construct knowledge across the network itself and between the researchers and the community stakeholders. As a result, one researcher said she began to understand collaboration itself 'as a political project', one that challenged the lines of power in the research-and-knowledge-production process. Others pointed out that in an international knowledge systems, Southern researchers often are mere spokes feeding into a northern knowledge hub. However, in this case, the collaboration and co-production across South-South lines was a way of challenging global inequalities. Others began to apply these approaches in their own settings, and we began to see ripples occurring as they adapted or replicated these ways of working.

Key research excellence criteria

There is little agreement on how to measure the success of complex research networks like Citizenship DRC and CORD that have such broad purposes and diverse audiences. Traditionally, the emphasis is put on their ability to produce high quality research as measured through such standard indicators as publication in peer reviewed journals. While such measures are important, our experience would suggest that they do not reflect the potential value of a networked approach to research.

In addition to the importance of a multidisciplinary approach grounded in local reality, our experience suggests that indicators of excellence must also pay attention to:

- *Multiple forms of research outputs.*
This ranges from publications in peer-reviewed journals that may be read by limited audiences, to policy briefings, videos, local case studies, in-country journal publications, newspapers, websites and others. Differing outputs have differing value, depending on the audience, messages and context.
- *Strengthened of capacities on individuals, research institutions and networks.*
This is measured not only in terms of skills, but also new attitudes, beliefs and practices (e.g. deepening relationships and social capital; new forms of collaboration; expanded awareness of the role of development research and how to use it for changing development policies; and a strengthened sense of agency and commitment by researchers themselves to use their skills towards the solutions of key development issues.
- *The sustainability of these individuals, research institutions and networks, and the lessons learned.*
We suggest that networks with a high degree of collaboration and ownership are more likely to produce more long-term investment in using new skills and results. Over time, it is not only the changes produced in the development research that may be the most significant and enduring; it is also the changes in the development *researchers* and their institutions.
- *Broader changes in policy, practice, discourse and attitudes to which the collaborative research has contributed.* Our experience is that high quality research that contributes to changes in thinking, policy or behaviour in a broad array of stakeholders has more value than the changes that are measured by the narrow metrics of academic peer review – although the two are not necessarily contradictory.

Challenges to Achieving Research Excellence

A key challenge in multi-country research networks is ongoing communication between researchers between face-to-face meetings. Participatory and collaborative approaches to research program development require time and regular, collaborative interaction. Regular communication and effective online collaboration is all the more important given the challenges of the participatory and iterative approach to building the overarching research frameworks within complex, multi-contextual research programs. Some key lessons for dealing with these challenges include the importance of:

- **dialogue**, both through workshops that are participatory and deliberative, as well as through electronic means;

-
- **building trust** and a constructive, non-competitive environment in which opinions can be aired across differences;
 - **taking time** to allow relationships and ideas to be built over multiple encounters. These may involve conflicts, but over time can produce positive results;
 - **paying attention** to clear and transparent decision making and governance of the research projects.

Lessons Learned

In hindsight, we did not pay enough attention early on to embedding research communications into the program. Over the course of the research program, the researchers became much more aware and intentional in understanding the ways in which research could contribute to change from the very beginning of the research process.

In mainstream ways of thinking about the transmission of research to policy or public action, ‘research utilization’ is a linear process that does not question the relationship of the researcher to those whose lives are being researched, or whose policies are being influenced. The assumed sequence is that a researcher produces high quality research that is communicated in professional journals to professional audiences, and which is then shared with various publics to bring about change.

Over time in our networks, this linear approach began to be challenged. In keeping with our more participatory research approaches, we began to see that the research process itself not only could produce knowledge, it could also simultaneously contribute to stimulating action, advocacy, and changes in policy, attitudes and beliefs. For example:

- In Nigeria, researchers from Amehdu Bello University used participatory theatre in dozens of villages across the country to understand local perceptions of citizenship, rights and government accountability;
- In Brazil, researchers used participatory video with youth in the *favelas* to understand how violence affected perceptions of citizenship and citizen action;
- In India, researchers worked with local Social Justice Committees to understand the role that these committees could play. Through a series of dialogues organized with local NGOs, the researchers helped to stimulate awareness of the potential of these committees and contributed in turn to the emergence of a strong, social justice movement.

In retrospect, we also see that it is essential for a project with such a broad and ambitious mandate to:

- closely integrate research, communications, policy influence and social change;
- use a collaborative and participatory approach to conducting research that engages research participants, partner organisations, researchers, activists, government officials and policy makers. The research methodology can itself be the most important means of communication.
- integrate research with communication by supporting learning about different methods and approaches to communication. Taking the opportunity to learn and even theorise about

communication, influence and change bolsters the credibility of "communication" in the eyes of researchers and enhances capacity building in tools of communication.

Suggested Additional Criteria

One very important criteria is **how research contributes to change at multiple levels**. At the end of our research program, we were asked by the funder to quantify our research contribution. Peer reviewed outputs received far more 'points' than products produced for other audiences. Yet, over time, change will happen from multiple approaches and uses, and the validity of the research will be determined by its relevance to the needs of many stakeholders, not just the researchers' peers.

The second criteria is **the degree to which the research project changes the researchers themselves, and creates capacities, networks and skills for ongoing contributions to research excellence**. In this case, CORD emerged as a Southern-led network from the earlier IDS-led project in which the researchers said the most important contribution was how it had changed themselves and their institutions. For instance:

- Researchers learned to work collaboratively to solve problems by linking research, policy and action.
- Many researchers now see themselves as agents and actors in processes of change, rather than bystanders or observers on the outside. Researchers also pointed to personal attributes including greater self-confidence, better leadership, and more effective communication skills.
- The program generated new networks of support such as CORD that operated nationally and internationally. These support networks are based on a thickening of relationships internally within national research teams and across borders, and involve connecting to donors and other researchers and practitioners in this field.
- Researchers have learned new research methods and how to combine research methods in creative ways. This includes some researchers with mainly quantitative experience who have new confidence with qualitative methods, and vice versa. In addition, a significant portion of the researchers have gained some expertise in participatory methods of research.
- Researchers obtained new research communication skills, including an ability to present their research to broader sets of audiences and an understanding of how to use research for policy and practice in their own contexts.
- New institutional capacities were developed. These included:
 - two new centres on citizenship and related themes in Brazil and South Africa;
 - a transnational programme of teaching and learning on citizenship and democracy including joint-taught courses in Canada, Bangladesh, and South Africa and a distance learning certificate in India; and
 - increased management and coordination skills for complex projects.

All of these outcomes contribute, we argue, to the assessment of research excellence for longer term and sustainable change. Ultimately research excellence is not only about the quality of research products. It is about the quality of change that is generated in the lives of researchers and communities alike.

Epilogue

The Learning Forum at the Coady International Institute highlighted that ‘rigour’ in research refers not just to methodology. Rather, in projects by and with civil society, rigorous design refers more broadly to the quality of participation and partnerships, the nature of collaboration, the strategy for communication and policy influence, as well as the more traditional understanding of the rigour of the research methods used. The Forum emphasised that not all participatory research methods are always effective; attention needs to be paid to the conditions under which participatory research can be used to achieve the best inclusionary, knowledge and policy or practice outcomes.

From our own experience of working in transnational research networks, engaging with development actors outside of the research institutions is a priority in many countries. Policy-makers are often not able to do their own research on emerging issues in rapidly-changing policy environments. Excellent development research takes engagement with policy-makers seriously and is concerned to understand which forms of engagement are most effective.

The Antigoniash learning forum showed that research excellence in development demands a close integration between methodological rigour, participation and policy influence. In addition, we would add to our definition of research excellence the building of collaborative and horizontal research networks and groups. The quality of the actual research collaboration itself has important effects on the quality and impact of the research itself. These lessons will continue to inform our work through the CORD network.

Endnotes

ⁱ Brown, David L. and John Gaventa (2008), “Constructing Transnational Action Research Networks: Observations and Reflections from the Citizenship DRC,” IDS Working Paper 302, Brighton, Institute of Development Studies.